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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine if there were any differences in the opinions of preservice teachers about the effectiveness of a new block structure for elementary education and methods courses and opinions about the previous course structure. The new structure implemented in the 2000-2001 academic year reduced the courses in elementary education and methods from four to two and decreased the time for on-site field experiences. A total of 144 elementary education preservice teachers participated from fall 1999 through spring 2001. In general, attitudes about the degree of preparation for teaching dropped during the 2000 academic year but rose to equal or exceed those of fall 1999 by spring 2001. This pattern may reflect a period of adjustment for instructors or uncertainty on the part of students. The reduction in the number of courses apparently had only a temporary negative effect on student attitudes about preparation for the subject content areas. (SLD)

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The concept of the Professional Semester in the College of Education at The University of Louisiana at Monroe (formerly Northeast Louisiana University) originated in 1975 when the need was recognized for more practical application of what was being taught in the required methods courses of the elementary education degree program. At that time, five instructors taught five separate three-hour courses: methods in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and children's literature. An examination of course outlines of these courses and subsequent discussions with involved faculty revealed much duplication of generic activities such as lesson planning, unit planning, and writing instructional objectives. In addition, it was recognized by the instructors that the students needed an opportunity to apply the theory and teaching techniques in actual classrooms.

In 1976, the instructors redesigned the methods classes to be three hours long and included a generic class. This arrangement also included a practicum where students were in the schools for four hours each day for four weeks. From a single section of only 25 students in 1976, the Professional Block had grown to have two sections with 20-30 students per section by the year 1999. At first only one school was used; the elementary practicum now utilizes approximately 8 schools.

From 1976 to 1999, the Professional Block consisted of four methods classes (mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts) and a generic session of common topics. Each methods class was for three hours of credit while no credit was given for the generic session. The professors shared the responsibilities for covering the course material. Students were assigned to a teacher under whom they performed 80 hours of practicum work in the classroom at the end of the semester.

Beginning in the fall of 1999, students were assigned to a teacher earlier in the semester and were allowed to visit the classroom 5-6 times before the continuous four week field experience assignment at the end of each semester. Feedback from students revealed a need for the additional hours of observation and teaching experience. The Louisiana Blue Ribbon Commission on Teacher Quality recently created sweeping

changes to the state's requirements for teacher education programs. Due to these new state regulations the number of courses in elementary education and methods courses have been reduced from four to two courses beginning with the Fall 2000/Spring 2001 academic year. Due to collapsing these courses, the potential loss of in-depth instruction became a concern because the Elementary Block structure decreased time for on-site field experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to ascertain any differences in opinions of preservice teachers concerning the effectiveness of this new elementary block structure as compared to the previous one.

A 31 item questionnaire was completed anonymously each semester at the conclusion of the elementary block, after students had received their grades. For this particular study, only the questions pertaining to the students' sense of having been well prepared for the four content areas (science, social studies, language arts, math) were analyzed.

- The block students feel well prepared for teaching science.
- The block students feel well prepared for teaching social studies.
- The block students feel well prepared for teaching language arts.
- The block students feel well prepared for teaching mathematics.

A total of 144 elementary preservice students participated from fall 1999 through spring 2001. The means and standard deviations were determined for each question, for each semester, and t-tests were conducted to compare data on the previous course format with the new course format. Several significant differences were found (Table I). In general, attitudes dropped over the 2000 academic year, but rose to either equal or exceed those of Fall 1999 by the Spring 2001 semester (Figure 1). This pattern may reflect a period of adjustment for the instructors, and/or a period of uncertainty on the part of the students.

Responses to question #4 regarding Science dropped only during the Fall 2000 semester. Attitudes toward the Social Studies part of the elementary block dropped significantly for two semesters, but then returned to the Fall 1999 level by the last semester.

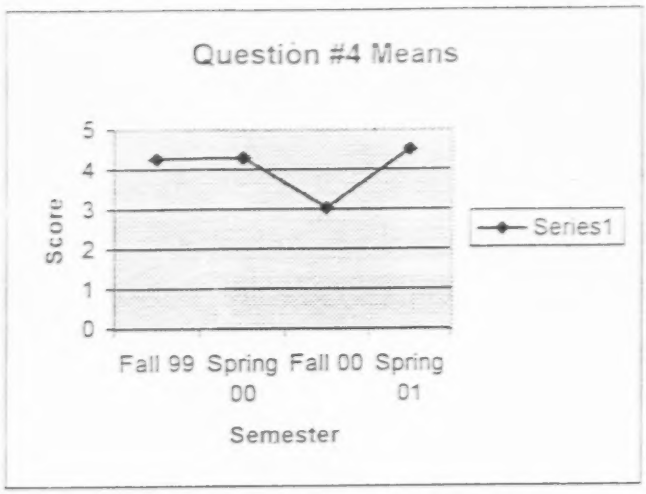
Responses to questions #6 (Language Arts) and #10 (Math) moved in reverse to that of #4 and #5. Both scores dropped dramatically over the Spring 2000 semester, but moved back up to Fall 1999 levels by the Fall 2000 semester, and edged a bit farther up in the Spring 2000 semester. These data show that as of the last semester for which data is available, student attitudes as reflected in these four questions have returned to their pre-program change level. Thus, this reduction in number of courses from four to two appears to have had only a temporary negative effect on the sense of preparation for these subjects. However, data from additional semesters will be required in order to determine if the recent rise in scores represents a trend.

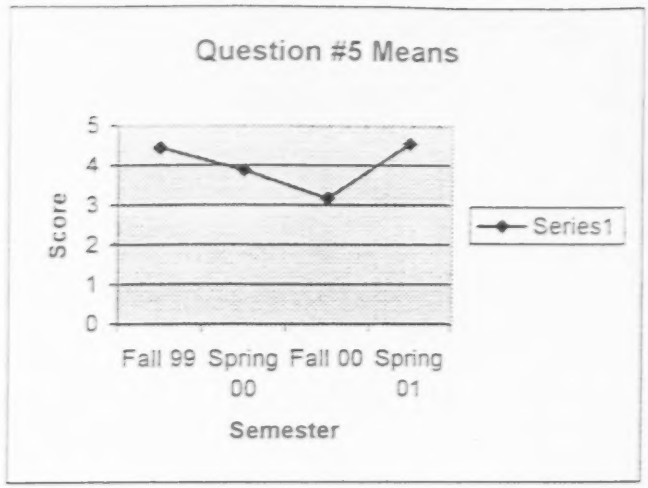
Table I

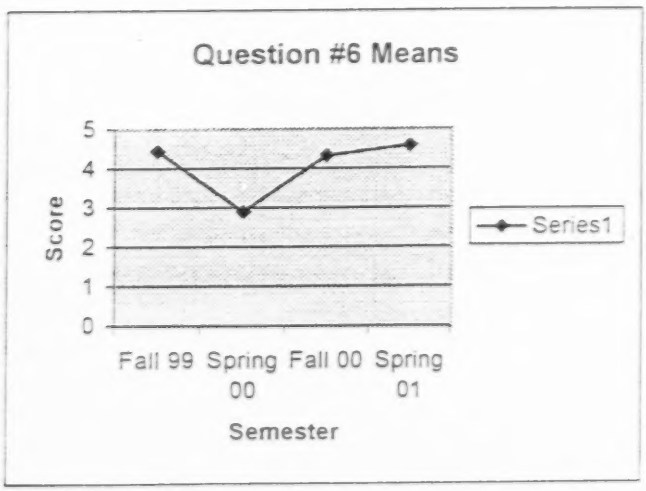
T-Tests Across Four Semesters

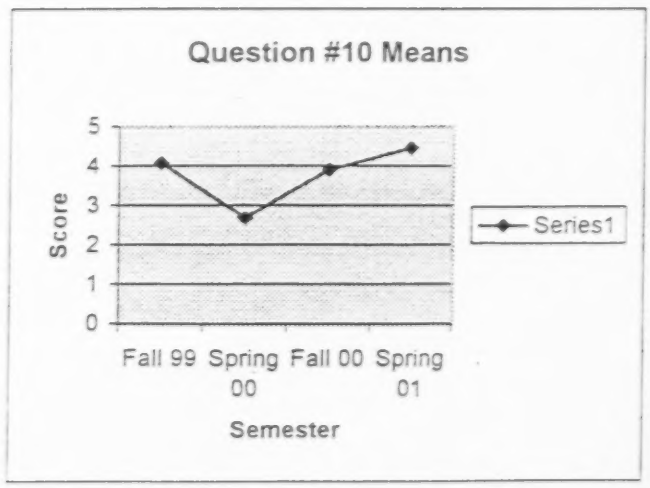
	SPR 2000 (Q4-Q10)	**F 2000** (Q4-Q10)	**SPR 2001** (Q4-Q10)
F '99: Q4	0.900 (NS)	0.0001	0.077
Q5	0.01	0.0001	0.274 (NS)
Q6	0.0001	0.220 (NS)	0.217 (NS)
Q10	0.0001 (F '99>SPR '00)	0.283 (NS) (F '99>F '00)	0.035 (SPR '01>F '99)
SPR '00: Q4		0.0001 (SPR>F)	0.128 (NS)
Q5		0.007 (SPR>F)	0.002
Q6		0.0001 (F>SPR)	0.0001
Q10		0.0005 (F>SPR)	0.0001
F '00: Q4			0.0001
Q5			0.0001
Q6			0.088
Q10			0.018 (SPR '01>F '00)

Figure 1









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